



The Crimson Thread by **mildred meadowlark**

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Summary: "Who are you?" he asked. "I'm Jane," she replied. "Who are you?" "I'm Mike." They are destined to meet time and again, pulled by the crimson thread which binds them, and torn apart by the cruel twists of fate and opportunity. Until... a chance meeting, and a clash of eyes changes everything. Soulmate AU. WIP.

1. The First Threads

Inspired by the Red String of Fate myth.

Hope you enjoy :)

-Millie

The First Threads

When first they met, the time was wrong.

Or was it the place?

They passed each other like ships in the night, not even a glance shared between them.

Second they met was better.

Closer.

A different time, a different place, and – this time – a realm of possibility, of almost and maybe.

It took little but a fleeting moment – a glimpse, a flicker of awareness, brief and innocuous – but it was enough.

xxxxxx

somewhere...

some place neither here nor there... where the darkest colours of our souls dwell... something, a glimmer perhaps... something begins to stir...

...there is a swift flare of light, then... nothing...

and then... a gleam of crimson... twining, ebbing, flowing in the darkness... until...

... a thread...

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The third time... ah, just a little too late.

They met, yes, but-

It was not to be.

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"Hey! Hey you!"

A flicker of red, a shimmer in the air, as the strand between them grew tense with awareness...

The cry carried down the quietened hallway. There was almost no one left – they'd all gone home for the day. All but her. Whoever she was.

She didn't turn.

Rolling his eyes, he made to chase down the hallway after her.

"Hey!" he tried again. "Hey!"

Still nothing. She sauntered on heedlessly.

The string began to gleam, pulling them ever closer...

He caught up to her and reached out to grab her arm.

"Hey!" he tried one last time, and this time – his proximity, his hand on her sleeve – she turned.

Pulling her brows down into an imposing frown and yanking her headphones down, she swung around to face him.

"What?"

He almost forgot what he was doing.

She wasn't beautiful, not in the safe, traditional way most pretty girls were. She had sleek dark hair, cut into a sharp bob and the most

ferocious brown eyes he'd ever seen, and he stared at her for more moments than he'd have liked to admit.

Between them, the thread grew almost gold with light, willing them to cross the divide, twining itself around their wrists...

Then with a shake of his head, he gathered himself.

"Here," he said, putting something into her hand. "You dropped this."

She hadn't taken her eyes off him, but when she felt the weight of something in her hand, she looked down.

It was her wallet, small and red, vivid in her palm.

She frowned at it, and a quizzical expression crossed her brow.

Then she closed her hand around it, and shoved it into her pocket, then looked up at him again, this time curiously.

"Um... thank you," she said, her voice soft.

"Sure..." he replied. "Um... no problem."

"Yeah. So..." she murmured, looking down at her feet awkwardly. "I suppose I'll see you round."

"Yeah..." he said distantly, feeling a strange buzzing in his head. "Sure. See you round."

And then, giving him a fleeting glance, chased by a smile, she turned and carried on down the hallway, righting her headphones as she walked.

And somewhere in the air between them, unseen by either, a gleaming red thread wound and grew taut, before unravelling and then falling still.

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Fourth time, fifth time... still no good came of it. The threads of time and fate remained tangled.

Sixth time, another close one.

And then seven.

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Sometimes sleep came easy to her. Sometimes not.

She'd always been a difficult child, not that her mother would have admitted it.

The night was hot and she was toying with the fine, crimson band around her wrist. She'd had it for as long as she could remember, and plucking at it had always been a nervous habit.

She was sprawled out on her bed, having kicked the blankets off at least an hour ago. It was too heavy, too humid, too sticky.

But there was... a strangeness in the air. Like the kind of tension that falls before a thunderstorm.

She didn't like thunderstorms.

Still fiddling with the worn threads, she closed her eyes and tried to breathe deep and steady, but her heart was racing and she couldn't say why. Keeping her eyes closed, she tried to focus on the deep silence of the night, on the low sound of her own breath falling into the stillness of her room.

Are you there?

Her eyes flew open, the sound of her heart hammering in her ears.

Beneath her trembling fingers, the finest threads of her band began to glow, faint and flickering.

It had been a voice, barely loud enough to be heard over the thrum of her own pulse.

A boy.

Sucking in a steadying breath, she closed her eyes once more and waiting, listening, wondering...

At first, nothing happened, and she was on the verge of giving up.

But then...

I know you're still out there, I know you are... It's day 178. It feels like a long time. But you've got to come back... Just... come back, okay? I... I miss you.

And then it was gone... whatever it was, leaving her tremulous and weary and a little afraid.

That voice.

She felt... as though she knew it from somewhere...

From a dream?

No. She didn't think so.

Who was he?

She fell asleep quickly, with that question haunting her mind, and dropped into a dream that was as eerie as it was familiar, though she always struggled to remember it when she woke.

Black. All around her, and almost glaring in its intensity. And a dripping, watery sound, echoing all about her, though she could see no water. She could see, as though the blackness was lit with a kind of unseen light.

And a sense of... being somewhere that was entirely... *other*.

But tonight...

Tonight it was different.

There was someone here.

I know I shouldn't be doing this... But I just... I have to try. And if you can hear me, please... just give me a sign... And I know I say it every night. But I won't give up, El. I won't give up on you...

The boy.

He was here.

She looked around frantically, trying to find the source of the voice.
And then... out of the corner of her eye

A flicker of scarlet..

Suddenly she saw him.

He was sitting, cross-legged on the ground, holding a walkie-talkie in his hand. He had dark, dark hair and sad eyes, and wore his dejectedness like a shield.

Taking slow, careful steps, matching them to her slow, careful breaths, she made her way over to him. He didn't seem to notice her at all. Not even when she drew right up beside him and crouched next to him on the ground.

***I'll be late tomorrow. I'm going to Will's to work on our campaign.
But I'll call. I promise, Eleven... Promise.***

Eleven.

As soon as she heard it, her heart began to pound and she felt a stirring deep inside herself, and then – before she could stop herself – her lips formed a name that fell unbidden from her mouth.

"Mike..."

His eyes flared, and he looked around, and for a fleeting moment his eyes stilled on her. Had he seen her?

She reached out a hand to him, unaware of her own movements.

And then...

She saw his hand lift and reach out in response...

And for just a moment it seemed their hands would brush-

The fibril between them gleamed brighter than ever before and it seemed that this time it would transcend the tapestry of space and time which

separated them...

And then, she woke. Her pulse in her throat, and the faint tracks of tears on her cheek, tangled in blankets and rapidly dwindling memory...

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Eight and nine were promising, and ten was a write off.

There would have been a beautiful kind of elegance if it had been the eleventh time, but life is rarely as neat as that.

Is it?

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He'd known about her for a long time.

She'd first appeared to him when he was four, and he'd been unafraid of things like the presence of a girl only he could see.

It was probably just as well.

Who are you? he'd asked.

I'm Jane, she'd replied. Who are you?

Mike, he'd said. Where did you come from? How'd you get in my room?

I don't know, she'd said.

The red thread was knotted in her fingertips, unseen by the boy, and almost burnished with light.

D'you wanna play? he'd asked, and she'd nodded.

And that was that.

She visited him regularly after that first day. She was smaller than him, though not younger – something which perplexed him somewhat - and had dark blond curls that always seemed to be

tangled.

At first, they played in silence, those first few months. But after a time, as they grew older, conversation sprang up like buttercups between them.

Mike? she asked.

Yeah?

Do you have a father?

Yeah, he said. Do you?

No.

Oh, he replied. And then - Hey did I show you this? My mom got it for me on Tuesday. C'mon, I'll show you...

Cool! she said, envious. My mom would never let me have that. You're so lucky!

Your Aunt Becky might...

No way! she laughed. For my birthday, maybe.

Hey, Jane, does anybody know you come here? he asked.

No. It's just us.

Good, he replied, satisfied.

It's our secret... Hey Mike, what's your favourite book?

Years passed, and still she visited. He still didn't know where she came from, or how she got there, and still didn't question it. It was still their secret.

The thread grew brighter, stronger; forming a winding, plaited length that wound round them, over and again, like an endless spiral...

They'd grown and were swiftly leaving childhood. Her hair grew longer and darker, and her eyes seemed to grow larger, more

perceptive. He grew taller, becoming lanky and moody with the passage of time. It had become harder to ignore the fact that she was a girl. A pretty one.

It became impossible on the day of her sixteenth birthday.

He'd been waiting for her. He knew she'd come. She always did, especially on birthdays. She loved presents with a kind of honest greed that was better suited to a two-year-old than a teenager.

It was one of his favourite things about her.

And he had a gift for her, just as he'd always done. The first one had been his dinosaur Rory. Another had been a scarf in rainbow colours, after she hadn't been able to pick a favourite colour and he'd laughed at her. This time he'd gotten her something special.

It was her sixteenth birthday after all.

She appeared shortly after nine in the evening, just as the sky was growing dark, and he was fiddling with the red knitted friendship bracelet she'd given him not long after that first time. It happened like it always did. He never saw her actually *appear* in front of him. Rather more like a flicker of movement, caught in the corner of his eye, and then he'd turn and she'd be standing there.

And there she was.

...a crimson gleam, as she dropped the braided threads from her fingertips impatiently...

Hey, she said, smiling.

Happy Birthday, he replied, unable to help his own answering smile.

Thanks, she said, her smile widening to a grin. Is that for me?

How did you know? He asked, laughing.

Just a guess, she replied.

He handed her his gift, feeling his heart speeding up a bit, and wasn't

sure why. She plucked at the wrapping with eager fingers, her face alive with that look she got when she was truly excited.

Once she'd freed the gift from its wrapping, she let the paper fall to the floor, and held the box in her hands. She didn't open it right away, but he knew this was just her way. She liked to savour it.

After she'd run her fingers over the box, tracing the pink pattern with thumb, looking at it as though trying to memorise it, she lifted the lid of the box.

He heard the sudden intake of breath, and there was a moment of brief horror where he wondered if he'd got it totally wrong. But then she turned to look at him, and he saw-

Her face, flushed pink with pleasure, eyes black and shiny like polished ebony, as she stood holding the silver comb in trembling hands.

She looked *beautiful* in that moment, and he wondered absently why it had taken him so long to figure it out.

Mike... you didn't- you *shouldn't* have, she breathed, taking a step towards him.

Between them, the threads tugged and twisted, urgent and compelling...

Nah-

No really, she went on taking another step. It's- just... too much-

No it's not, he protested, moving closer to her. Seriously, it's just a comb.

It's not just a comb and you know it, she snapped.

Jane, for God's sake, just shut up, he said, as he closed the distance between them.

The threads pulled ever tighter, weaving and plaiting over each other, webbing together like lace...

He reached out for her hand, his fingers encircling her wrist. They'd never really touched before – not like this – and his heart was racing. Her skin felt soft under his fingertips, and he could feel the rapid tread of her pulse beneath his grasp.

He looked down into her eyes, coffee and amber, and so wide...

He raised his other hand, tracing his fingers along the line of her jaw, pausing to tilt her chin up, and then, finally, *finally*, brought his lips to hers.

It was sweet, gentle, and he felt her trembling exhalation, and the soft suddenness of her answering kiss, and wanted to pull her close-

But as he went to so, to run his fingers through those gorgeous curls of hers, he came up with nothing. His hands met no resistance as they passed through the air, and somehow he knew, *he knew*, she was gone.

On the floor, by his feet, lay a bundle of knotted, gleaming thread...

And though he waited, for more years than he cared to admit, far longer than he should have... she never came back.

Not once.

xxxxxx

A trail of disappointments followed after.

Time and place and opportunity folded and altered like silk, bending and creasing capriciously.

It was rare they even met. The merest of encounters. Dreams, fragments of memory.

Paltry.

Until-

It was the twenty-sixth time and place, the twenty-sixth life, and it seemed – for once – that things were finally right.

So it seemed, as the red twine once again began to glow...

So... what do you think?

I'm quite excited about this one, and I hope you like it so far.

The inspiration for this fic is based on The Red String of Fate, which is a myth found in both Chinese and Japanese folklore, and finds it's basis in the idea that soulmates are connected by a red string. Traditionally, it is tied around the pinkie finger or ankle, and will connect the two for life, regardless of whether they meet or not. I have toyed with a number of elements of this myth, as you will (hopefully) see later in the fic.

Anyway, the real story will kick off in the next chapter.

Thank you for reading, and please let me know what you think.

-Millie

2. A Promising Skein

A/N: New chapter! Hope you enjoy :)

-Millie

A Promising Skein

Her childhood had been a lonely one.

Homeschooled and hidden by her mother for too many years, she'd had no friends and no confidantes.

Until the morning she'd woken up and found her mother cold in her bed. Gone.

Just like that.

An aneurysm, they said.

In the days leading up to the funeral, Aunt Becky had arrived, white-faced and smoking incessantly and they'd watched, both of them dry-eyed and numb, as Terry Ives was lowered into the black earth beneath their feet.

She'd loved her mom. But nothing about the funeral moved her. It was as though she'd turned to stone.

After the funeral, things happened quickly. The house was sold and packed up, and within three weeks of the death of Terry Ives, it was as though she and her strange daughter had never lived there at all.

The town of Hawkins, sleepy with thick woods and heavy mists, was small and quiet.

Nothing much happened there.

It was late September, and there was nothing special in the air to suggest that his whole world was about to change. He'd overslept –

again – and was hurrying to the office to get a late pass.

He knew it would mean detention, and another lecture from his mom, but he ignored those thoughts as he walked up the corridor of Hawkins High. As he stood at the office, waiting for his pass, and hoping that Principal Vernon wasn't going to show up, his eyes fell on a girl sitting across the hall, right outside the Principal's office.

She was scuffing worn shoes against the floor absently, fiddling with a bracelet on her wrist.

New girl, he thought to himself.

Then she looked up and caught his eye.

She had large brown eyes, intense and knowing, and an unreadable expression on her face. He stared back at her for a moment, then caught himself, and looked quickly away.

"Michael Wheeler," came the bored voice of Mrs Jackson, the school secretary. "Here's your slip. Now don't let me see you here again this week, you hear? Or I'll be calling your mother."

"Sure," Mike mumbled, taking the slip. "Thanks Mrs Jackson."

He slouched away from the office, lingering just a little, watching the girl once more. There was something... something familiar about her.

Shaking his head, he shouldered his bag and made his way to class, unaware that the girl's dark gaze followed his form as he disappeared down the hall.

Nor did he hear her as she breathed a small sigh, and mouthed a name she knew as well as her own.

"Mike..."

It was easier at night.

Searching for someone was always tough, but at night it seemed to come more readily to her. And she preferred that Becky didn't know

what she was up to.

She rarely searched for him. He found her all by himself, usually. But it had been a while, so she decided to seek him out.

Tying a scarf around her head, and shutting off all of the lights, save for one low, flickering light in her room, she sat cross-legged on her bed and focused.

She drew her breaths out, long and slow and even, thinking only of the endless black in front of her eyes and the sound of his voice. The silence of the house was profound; not even the ticking of a clock disturbed the quiet.

And then she was there, in the endless, echoing dark of her own head – *was it her own head?* – and she knew she was close. She could hear the muted tones of his voice, carrying to her in the far distance.

Sometimes, she was able to use the red string to find him. But not always. It was a strange thing, that thread. Frustrating. Sometimes there, and sometimes not.

It usually led her to him – to this boy.

To Mike.

He was talking to someone, as usual.

El. Whoever that was.

... and, you know, we haven't been out to the water park in ages so we decided we'd go. It's been really hot and Jonathon said he'd take us. It was so cool. We went on the lazy river and the waterslides and we had a huge water fight in the shallow pool. Maybe... maybe next time you can come... if you're back... You've been gone for so long now... 218 days, El. I'm still counting.

She approached him, slowly, taking her usual quiet steps, like treads on a well-worn path. She'd always had questions – not that he'd have been able to answer anyways – and now she had even more.

This Mike, the one here in her head, was not the same Mike she'd

seen today. This Mike was younger - twelve, thirteen, maybe.

And yet they were the same. Or seemed to be.

He'd always been there, in the rippling ether of her own mind. At first, just a distant voice, words scattered on a fickle wind and a lost dream. And then, one day he'd simply been there.

She'd heard about his friends, about Will, and Dustin and Lucas. About his sisters and his mom. His complaints about his dad. How much he missed El.

She'd heard him. She wondered if El had.

Sometimes, there in the blue-black depths of herself, she would hear his words and feel a resonance that rang like a sounding drum, feel the tugging of her soul and itching of her skin, and she would try to speak to him.

It was futile though. She'd tried enough times to know.

Was it really him? she asked herself. *Were they one and the same?*

She had to know.

Blinking rapidly, she pulled the scarf away from her eyes as she fell abruptly out of the trance. She heaved a frustrated sigh and ran a hand through her tangled curls, ignoring the trickle of blood which fell from her nose.

It was cold that morning, for September.

He'd had to listen to another round of complaining from his mom at breakfast, while his dad made more useless sports analogies ("You gotta know when to swing, son, and when to pitch"), and made his excuses, diving out the door before they could get into full swing.

He met the guys outside the school, but he was the first one there. No surprise. Dustin and Lucas had arrived together, as they usually did, driving over from Lucas' house, followed up by Adam.

They'd made friends with Adam Prescott in their first year of high school, and he'd slowly filled the hole left by Will after he'd moved to Maine a few years ago. They'd bonded over their love of D&D and *Star Wars*.

"Hey guys," Mike asked, as they made their way into the school building. "You staying later to work on that History project for Edelman?"

"Shit, yeah," Dustin replied. "My mom says I gotta try pull up my grade a little if I want money for the movies on Friday."

"Who's going?" Lucas asked.

Dustin shrugged.

"I dunno. Adam, who's going?"

"I dunno. I thought someone was gonna ask Max?" Adam shrugged, looking at Mike.

"Son of a bitch," Dustin swore. "I was supposed to do it."

"What? So that's it?" Lucas asked, unimpressed. "Your little arcade buddy and us?"

"Um, excuse me," Dustin shot back, "but I thought the plan was that I would ask Max, and *she* would invite some of the girls, taking the hard part away from us."

"Yeah, so should you not have done that by now?" Mike asked. "It's Wednesday."

"Ugh. Its fine, Mike, shut up," Dustin groaned. "I'll do it today. She's in my Chem class. I have it fifth period."

"Fine. But get it done," Mike called out, as he carried on down the corridor, leaving Dustin and Adam by their lockers.

"What are we gonna see?" Lucas asked, as they continued walking.

"I dunno," Mike shrugged. "*Beetlejuice* is playing."

"Mike, that's a kid's movie," Lucas scoffed.

"I dunno. I didn't look. We'll check it out later," he replied, and stopped by his locker.

"See you later," Lucas nodded, as he carried on around the corner to his locker.

He stashed his books in his locker and grabbed the papers he needed for his first class. Just as he slammed his locker shut, the bell rang and he hurried off to class.

The last thing he needed was another detention.

The sound of the bell was shrill and urgent in her ears, and she didn't think she'd get used to it in a hurry. She'd been trying to find her English classroom, but she wasn't sure and the school was bigger than she'd expected.

She hurried down the corridor, looking around her for the room number...

Then just down the hallway she saw it, and picked up her pace, as she saw others doing. She wasn't the only one running late that morning.

When she walked into the classroom, she saw it was still only half filled, and took a seat in the second row, as close to the window as possible. She pulled her books and pens out of her bag, setting them on the desk.

As soon as she'd put her bag onto the ground, the teacher walked into the room. Mrs Timmons had wispy hair and a gravelly voice, and a passion for John Donne, as Jane would later learn.

"Good morning class. Take out your books – yes, all of you. Page one hundred and twenty, please. Now, let us continue with the discussion of the inherent themes of purity, and good versus evil. So we left off..."

Jane shuffled her book to page one hundred and twenty, and pulled

out her notebook. She'd read *Dracula* when she was fourteen, and she enjoyed being able to go over it again.

As she sat taking notes, listening to the teacher talk about Lucy being turned into a vampire, and the corruption of her purity, she felt a prickling sensation on the back of her neck.

She was being watched.

She threw a glance over her shoulder and saw him.

Mike.

As he caught her eye, he didn't immediately look away, but she did, feeling suddenly awkward, though she couldn't explain why. She could feel heat in her cheeks, and bent her head low over her notepad, trying to turn her attention back to class.

She did her best, but it was hard. And though she could feel his eyes on the back of her neck, ever-present, she did not look his way again.

The sun was hanging golden in the sky when school let out for the day. The guys had decided to meet at the at Lucas' car before going to work on their history project.

"Hey man," Mike said, as he strolled over to Lucas, who was sitting on the hood of his car.

"Hey," Lucas nodded. "You seen Adam?"

"Not since lunch. Why?"

"I was gonna ask him if he'd give Dustin a ride home. I gotta go. My mom needs me to help her with my Granma."

"What about the project?" Mike asked.

"What about it?" Lucas retorted. "I don't need to do extra work for History. That's just you losers."

"Nice," Mike rolled his eyes. "Hey look," he said, as his eyes caught

sight of a familiar red head. "There's Max."

She was marching out of the school, head down as she yanked on the zip of her bag, oblivious to their stares.

"Hey Max!" Mike called out to her.

Her head shot up and her eyes fell on them, and then she swung the bag onto her back and made her way over to them.

"Hey guys. What's up?"

"Did Dustin ask you about Friday?" Lucas asked, sliding off the hood of his car.

"No," she frowned. "What about Friday?"

"Shit," Lucas swore. "He was *supposed* to ask you today."

"Yeah, okay," she nodded impatiently. "Ask me *what* though?"

Mike and Lucas exchanged pained looks.

"Alright, so..." Mike began, "Dustin was supposed to ask you if you wanted to come to the movies with us in Friday?"

"You guys? Like all of you?" she asked, raising a brow.

"Well, yeah," Mike replied, looking a relieved.

"And well, we thought that..." Lucas jumped in. "Well, you know, you're a girl and"-

"Thanks for noticing, loser," she sniggered.

"Ugh," Mike groaned. "We just thought you might ask a few other girls as well. We could go as one big group or something."

Max cast a cool look his way, considering. Then she shrugged.

"Sure. I'll see what I can do," she said, before turning on her heel and sauntering away.

Mike saw Lucas watching her go, but decided not to comment.

She'd been to an arcade before, but she liked the one in Hawkins a lot more than the crappy little one in her old hometown. Not that she'd ever really been allowed to go. Birthdays, usually. And once when she'd snuck out, and been caught.

But this one was cool. Max had cajoled her into going with her, and she was surprised by how much fun she was having.

Of course she was awful at the arcade games, but she enjoyed watching Max go to town on them. She could see by the score boards that Max held a number of high scores.

"C'mon, we'll go check out *Street Fighter*," Max said, grabbing her hand and pulling her around a corner to another aisle of games.

But Max stopped dead when she saw a cluster of boys around the front of *Street Fighter*.

"Those little shits," she muttered under her breath.

"What's wrong?" Jane asked her, not really understanding exactly *why* she was so annoyed by this group of boys.

"Just some guys from school. They're assholes," she replied. "They're not really assholes. But... right now? Yeah. They're assholes."

Jane didn't reply. She sensed that one wasn't really required anyway.

Max straightened her shoulders as the group of guys let out a collective groan as someone clearly lost their go.

"Alright, my turn, my turn," one of them cried, pushing his way to the front.

Then another one of them caught sight of Max and called out to her.

"Hey Max! You coming over to show these guys how it's done?"

Jane looked at Max and saw that she was smiling already.

"Sure," she said, then she turned to look at Jane. "Coming?"

Jane nodded, and they approached the four boys standing in front of the arcade game.

"Who's this?" one of them asked.

"Oh, yeah," said Max. "This is Jane."

Jane smiled at them.

"That's Dustin," Max went on, pointing at the guy who had called them over. "This is Adam," she pointed at the tall guy with sandy hair. "And that's Lucas," she finished, the faintest blush on her cheeks.

"Oh, and that's Mike," Dustin added, motioning to the guy who was currently playing *Street Fighter*.

Jane froze, for the merest second.

Him. Again.

Ignoring how heart was beginning to pound, and how her palms had begun to sweat, she turned to the others and tried to join in on the conversation.

"So, Jane, where are you from?" asked Lucas.

"Up past Ruane," she replied, deliberately vague.

"When did you move here?" asked Adam, peering at her curiously.

"Yeah, you only just started at school, like what? Yesterday?" Dustin added.

Jane shrugged.

She didn't really want to talk about it. If she did, then she'd have to talk about her mom, and she wasn't ready to do that yet. Not even to Aunt Becky.

"Jesus, guys, what's with the twenty questions?" Max cut in with a laugh.

"We're just curious, Max," Dustin whined at her.

"Aw *shit*!"

They all turned to look at Mike, who was about to kick the machine in frustration.

"Seriously, guys, did you *see* that?" he asked, before noticing that none of the others were with him, and then turned.

His eyes immediately seemed to find Jane's, and she felt her stomach twist and her breath catch like a cough in her throat. He came over to them and joined the group.

"Who's this?" he asked, an echo of an earlier question.

Max raised her brow, and turned to Jane, a smirk decorating her mouth.

"I dunno, Jane, who is this?" she asked, pointedly.

Then Jane, wearing a sly grin of her own, brought her eyes to Mike's and was struck by them, in spite of herself.

"New girl," she said.

His eyes widened at that for the merest moment, and he let out a faint laugh.

"I'm Mike," he said, his eyes still on hers and she couldn't look away.

"I know," she replied.

And it was the strangest thing...

It was as though he knew, as though he understood the hidden meaning behind her words. And maybe he *had* seen her in that void of time and place...

Maybe he could feel that tug, something that was greater and more compelling than instinct-

Maybe he too could see the gleam of red which flickered between

them like the finest strand of light.

A/N: I just wanted to say thank you to SallyJAvery who was good enough to beta this for me and offer some excellent feedback and guidance. You are a fucking diamond Sally and there is so much love and cake going your way.

I also wanted to say thank you to everyone who stopped by to leave a review - you guys are all so nice :)

Thanks also to everyone who faved and followed.

I hope you enjoyed the new chapter - and please do let me know what you think.

-Millie xx

3. A Familiar Pull

A/N: Apologies for the delay with this update.

Enjoy!

-Millie x

A FAMILIAR PULL

She'd said her name was Jane, yet somehow... it didn't feel right.

She *looked* like a Jane, sure. But it just didn't seem to fit, stumbling from his lips like an unfamiliar language.

She was quiet, and he liked that. She didn't try to draw attention to herself. But he couldn't help noticing her anyway

He watched her; dragging his eyes away only for them to drift irresistibly back to her. She was fucking *magnetic* and he couldn't stop it, even if he wanted to.

She stood watching Dustin and Lucas argue about whose turn it was to play *Street Fighter*, mouth slanted to a slow half-smile which turned to laughter as Max barged past the two boys and popped money into the machine, ignoring their outraged spluttering.

Then suddenly, feeling like a punch to the gut, her eyes flicked to him, doe-bright and wide. Before he was even aware of it, he'd moved, heading straight for her.

She looked up at him, her gaze dark, and steady, and considering. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but found himself - weirdly, stupidly - unable.

Her mouth quirked into another one of those soft smiles that she seemed to hand out like presents. But she didn't speak, didn't relieve the heaviness in the air between them.

But then again, neither did he.

Adam, who'd been standing next to Jane, watched the two of them – eyes darting between them – for a moment, brows raised, before shaking his head and heading over to watch Max kick ass on *Street Fighter*.

He didn't say anything as he left, and Mike found himself profoundly grateful for it.

Still, neither spoke.

And somewhere under the weight of their mutual silence, he could feel – like a tickle in his chest – a tugging, a pull, faint and insistent. And familiar.

How? he asked himself. *And why do I feel like I know her face?*

"Have... Have we met before?" he asked, stammering over the words a little.

Her brow furrowed.

"No..." she replied, though there was a filament of uncertainty there. "I mean... I just moved here."

"Huh, that's funny. I thought maybe I knew you from somewhere."

She gave him an odd, piercing look before replying.

"No." And this time her reply came readily, with quiet certainty.

"Oh..." he said, feeling oddly deflated. "Uh, okay."

And then she smiled at him, and something in him gave way, and then for a moment... the merest moment, he thought he caught a glimpse of red, something intangible and flickering like candlelight in the space between them.

And then he blinked, and it was gone.

But still, it was a long time, long after he'd left the arcade and fallen into bed, before the unsettling, tugging sensation left him, and the clamouring of his thoughts finally fell quiet.

The next morning, Jane made her way down to the kitchen, where her Aunt Becky was fixing breakfast for them both.

"Mornin' Janie," she called cheerily from her place by the stove.

"Morning," Jane mumbled, slumping into a seat at the table and pouring herself a glass of orange juice.

She'd slept poorly; chasing the red string in endless circles inside her own head and coming up with nothing, and now... her eyes felt sandy with tiredness and her body slow with fatigue and frustration.

"Eggs okay?" asked Becky, pulling out plates as she spoke.

Jane mumbled her assent, and sipped at her juice.

Becky made her way over to the table carrying their plates, and set one down in front of Jane, before sitting down across from her.

"So," she began, as she tucked into her breakfast, "you were kinda late getting in last night. Where'd you go again? The arcade?"

Jane nodded, taking a bite of her eggs.

"You have fun?" Becky pressed on, ignoring Jane's dull eyes and tired features.

"Sure. It was fine," she replied evasively. "Bigger than the one back home. More... stuff."

"Sure," Becky echoed. "More *stuff*. Who was that girl you went with?" she asked. "You were gone before I could even catch her name."

"Max," Jane qualified, swallowing another bite. "I met her yesterday. At the school office. She's in a couple of my classes. She's nice."

"Right. Max," her aunt nodded. "Okay. That's good."

She shrugged as she grabbed the last few mouthfuls of her breakfast and draining her glass of orange juice, then stood and brought her dish over to the sink.

"You want a ride to school?" Becky asked, as she began to clear her own plate.

Jane nodded, feeling suddenly guilty for being so short with her aunt.

"You go get your bag," she went on. "I'll be in the car."

Jane went to the door, then paused and looked back at Becky standing by the sink and rinsing the dishes.

"Thank you," she said, so softly she wasn't sure that her aunt had heard her, and then turned and continued out into the hallway and up the stairs to her room.

He would have been lying to himself if he said he *wasn't* looking for her, scanning the busy hallway for the sight of her tangled brown curls, hoisted into a lazy topknot...

And coming up with only Dustin instead.

Wrong curly head.

"Hey Mike. Who you looking for?"

"No one," he muttered, turning back to his locker.

"Sure," Dustin said, his tone sceptical, but he didn't say more.

"Where's Lucas?" he asked, as he shoved his Calculus books into his bag.

"He's out front with Max and Debra Carlisle," Dustin shrugged. "I dunno. He said he needed to talk to them. Where's Adam?"

"Dunno," Mike shrugged, then grinned. "I bet he's late this morning. He has Spanish with Mrs Samson. He *hates* her."

"Enough to risk detention? Again?"

"Maybe," Mike shrugged again.

"You check out the movies for tomorrow?" Dustin asked.

"Crap, I forgot."

"You didn't!"

"It's fine. We'll decide what we want to watch when we get down there."

"Son of a bitch," Dustin swore. "I can't believe you forgot!"

"Oh and you didn't forget to talk to Max yesterday?" Mike shot back, raising a sceptical brow. "Don't worry about it though, I asked her after school."

"Fine, you win," Dustin grinned with typical good humour. "C'mon, we'd better get to class."

They grabbed their bags and made their way towards Mr Howard's classroom for their Calculus class, shuffling through the crowded hallway. Mike listened absently as Dustin rambled on about something he'd seen on TV last night after the arcade.

Then suddenly, he felt an eerie kind of stillness in the air, a strange quietude... and then, a russet gleam, shimmering in the corner of his eye, and *then*-

Awareness.

There she was. Standing by her open locker, and those dark, expressive eyes trained on his. He stopped, unable to take his eyes from her, and the moment stretched on: quiet and infinite.

And then he saw it again: a fine strand, glowing with reddish light, twining and lifting on invisible currents in the air between them. He followed the line of it, and was oddly unsurprised when he saw that it led to her.

She was still watching him, a curious smile teasing the corners of her mouth, and Mike felt his own mouth lifting into an answering grin.

And again he felt it: the tugging, pulling sensation. And it grew and grew, until he felt as though every cell in his body was desperately urging him to move, to take that first step towards her.

Between them the thread began to grow and twist with a dazzling ferocity.

Mike's eyes widened, and he cast a glance at her, wondering...

She, too, stood wide-eyed and pale, her gaze fixed on the flaring strand which connected them.

Somehow, she could see it too...

It felt like a million moments had passed, but finally he took a step towards her and he felt the draw intensify. Another one, and the thread grew brighter still, and her eyes flew to his.

Two more steps, slow and certain, and he'd reached her. She watched him with a bright, expectant gaze, and he was blind to everything but her.

And then, just as he'd opened his mouth to say something, *anything*-

"You two! Why aren't you in class?"

The cry came loud and, like the breaking of glass, the moment cracked and then shattered between them, and Mike suddenly realised that they were alone in the corridor.

He stole a final glance at her and something that sounded oddly like both a gasp and a sob fell from her lips, and then she turned to face the approaching teacher, a frown settling like storm-clouds on her brow.

Mike turned as Mr Bishop reached them, and had to resist the urge to roll his eyes at the sight of him.

"Wheeler!" the teacher barked. He hated Mike. "What are you doing out of class? And you," he rounded on the girl, "who are you? Why aren't you in class?"

"I'm Jane Ives," she replied, her soft voice at odds with her heavy frown. "I'm new."

"She wasn't sure where her Geography class is." Mike jumped in. "I

was just gonna show her where to go."

"Is that so?" Bishop eyed Mike distrustfully, before turning his attention back to Jane. "Well, Jane, I'll bring you to your first class. Wheeler, run along. I'll allow it this once."

Mike shrugged, as Mr Bishop began walking down the corridor, pausing to wait for Jane, who shut her locker and lingered a moment more.

"See you later?" she asked, fingers toying with her bag and avoiding his eye, a faint flush in her cheeks.

"Yeah, sure," he smiled. "See you later, Jane."

Then he turned and headed in the direction of his Calc class, wondering how he was going to explain his absence to Dustin and tried not to think about what had just happened. He looked back once, watching her narrow form disappear around a corner, as – unbeknownst to him – a red band, woven of the finest shining strands, had just appeared on his wrist.

She sat on her bed, wrapped in a throw knit from soft wool, a book tossed to the side, watching the ominous drift of blue-black clouds across the inkiness of the night sky.

Looking at the sky was nothing like looking into the darkness of her own consciousness. The sky was tremulous, and ever-changing, and day could be counted on to follow even the blackest of nights.

And sometimes... sometimes, she needed to be reminded of that.

But for now, she was toying with the idea of slipping into the ether of her own head and searching.

But for who?

After today, she honestly couldn't say.

Almost absently, she reached for the scarf which was draped on the edge of her bed and brought it to her eyes, before tying it tight at the

back of her head. The pull of the cloth blunted the sound, and shuttered her sight, and then she was slipping...

down...

...down...

...down...

And then she was there in the ceaseless night of the void, deep inside herself, so familiar... and so empty.

She spun in a slow circle, looking for a flash of sound, or colour. But there was nothing. So she decided to search for him. Again.

Raising her arm across her body, in a gesture she'd made a thousand times before, she drew her hand down to the gleaming red band which rested against the pulse of her wrist, and looped her fingers around it and waited.

Seconds passed, and she counted them like raindrops on a window.

And then, unfurling from the darkness with serpentine fluidity, a red fibril came chasing towards her, a current of warm, red-amber light that greeted her almost joyously.

It leapt to her fingertips, where they were still brushing the band on her wrist, and she caught it easily in her palm. And then she began to walk, following the trail left by the strand of glowing red-gold.

The quiet resonance of her footsteps was familiar to her, and for a while it was the only sound, save for the beat of her heart. It took a long time to find anything, or so it felt, but when she did she knew it in the way the hair on the back of her neck stood up with a thrill of awareness.

She could feel it acutely in the air, vivid and tense, and much more present than it had ever been before.

And then-

A sigh, from somewhere behind her, and she whipped around, expecting to see her Mike, and froze as realisation hit her: it wasn't her Mike at all.

It was him. The other Mike.

He was sprawled out on a bed, eyes closed against the world, his fingers threaded into his thick, dark hair, and he let out another deep sigh, leaden with frustration.

She was afraid to move. Even though she knew he couldn't see her – couldn't possibly know – she stood rigid. She didn't dare approach him in the way she had with her Mike.

After several long moments, marked by the deep, even sound of his breathing, and punctuated by a number of heavy sighs, he finally moved. Bringing his hands down from his hair, she watched as his fingers found something on his wrist...

Something painfully familiar.

A thin band, woven from scarlet threads, identical to the one linked around her own wrist.

She could feel the panic leaking into her veins, the low fluttering of her heart, and she watched as he ran his fingertips along the delicate braid of lustrous threads and felt her link to the ether grow tenuous and shaky...

And then, with a gasp, she was back. Back in her small, untidy bedroom. Back in the real world.

She flung the scarf aside, and gulped down a great breath of air, and then another one, trying to calm the frantic beating of her heart. She flopped back on the bed, reaching up absently to wipe the trickle of blood from her nose, and crawled under her blankets.

She wanted to think about what she had seen tonight in the void, but it was hard. Tremors shook her body, her heart was still racing, and she felt as though she was on the precipice of something both terrifying and amazing, and something she could never fully comprehend.

She'd never fully understood her connection to 'her' Mike. She'd just accepted it for what it was.

But now, it seemed she had a connection to the 'other' Mike too.

And she wondered what it all meant, and if she'd ever know.

He saw her at noon, weaving through the crowds in the cafeteria, and hurried to catch up with her. He'd been looking for her all morning.

"Hey, Jane!" he called out. "Jane!"

She turned then, a flush creeping up her thin cheeks and eyes carefully lowered, but didn't speak.

"Hey," he began, feeling slightly awkward now that he'd found her.

"Hi Mike," she replied, her voice quiet, and still not meeting his eye.

"You okay?" he asked, slightly concerned.

"What? Oh, no, I'm fine – just a bit tired," she said with a shrug. "Didn't sleep very well last night is all."

And then, finally (*finally?*), she looked up at him.

And it was true. She did look tired.

"Oh... um... I see. Well I suppose... um..." he tried, fumbling his words. "You see, we – I mean, the guys –we're going to the movies later with Max and some of the others... and well, I was wondering if you wanted to come? But, I mean, if you're tired..." he trailed off, feeling the warmth of embarrassment in his cheeks.

What was it about this girl?

But then she smiled, a real smile, and it caught him off-guard.

"Yeah, I'll be there," she murmured. "Max asked me already. She didn't say what time though...?"

"Oh right..." he replied, still feeling embarrassed. "Um, we're meeting at six. Outside the diner."

"Okay..." she nodded. "Great. I'm... I'm really"- she caught herself with a little cough, then blushed -"I'm looking forward to it. I'll see you

later?"

"Yeah," he said, faintly. "See you later."

The sun had just begun to set and twilight was settling like a dusky cloak onto the sky when Jane shut the door behind her and ran out to where Max was waiting in her car.

"Dude, about time," Max complained as Jane slid into the car.

"Sorry," she replied, hurriedly, "I couldn't find my wallet."

"What is it with you and that purse?" Max asked, as she turned on the engine. "That's like the third time you've lost it today."

"I know. Weird, right?" she said, as she double-checked her bag for the stupid purse. "So who else is going?"

"Um, well, the guys from the arcade, and a couple of girls from my Trig class," the other girl mused, distractedly as she steered the car down the winding stretch of road. "I dunno, maybe you've met them? Deb Carlisle and April Wu?"

"I dunno... maybe?" Jane frowned, trying to think, but she wasn't great with names, even at the best of times. And she'd met more people in the past week than she had in her entire lifetime.

"Don't worry about it. They're fine. Deb's kinda loud and April is a total nerd, but they're harmless," Max shrugged, unconcernedly. "They'll be at the diner with the others, so you'll see for yourself."

Jane nodded and continued to fidget with her bag.

"You want some music?" Max asked, reaching over to fiddle with the radio.

"Sure," she shrugged, as the strains of an unfamiliar song filtered through the air.

They were mostly silent for the remainder of the short drive, Max concentrating on driving the car and Jane lost in her thoughts, vivid

and chaotic.

Dustin and Lucas were standing outside the diner when they pulled into the parking lot, but before Jane and Max could even get out of the car, they'd been joined by Adam and two girls.

Shouldering her bag, and resolutely ignoring the twinge of nervousness in her stomach, Jane got out of the car and followed Max over to the group of people loitering in front of the diner.

"Max!" Dustin yelled unnecessarily as they approached, earning him a smack on the shoulder from Lucas.

"Dude. Volume," he scowled.

Dustin turned to look at him blankly, as Max and Jane reached them.

"Hey guys," said Max, an amused grin chasing the corners of her mouth. "Oh yeah, Deb, April, this is Jane," she went on, looping her hand round Jane's arm and dragging her forward to introduce her.

"And Jane, this is Deb," she continued, nodding to the girl with a mane of fluffy blonde hair and freckled cheeks, who smiled politely at Jane. "And that is April," she finished, as the tiny bespectacled girl with long black hair gave a small wave.

"Hi..." Jane said, her voice low. "So... um"-

"Sorry I'm late!"

A voice came carrying across the parking lot, and they turned to see Mike striding towards them looking stressed, and Jane felt a frisson run through her, and a prickle of sensitivity on her skin.

"Sorry! My mom would *not* let me out of the house," Mike complained as he reached them. "Seriously, she never gave Nancy this level of shit, and she was *way* worse than me."

"Yeah, Mike, how *is* Nancy?" Dustin asked with a smirk.

"Do. Not. Dustin," Mike groaned. "My sister, man, come *on*."

"Ugh," Max rolled her eyes. "I am not listening to this again. Let's get some food or we'll miss the movie."

She strode into the diner without a backward glance, ever-confident that the rest of them would follow.

Which, Jane noted with a wry grin, they duly did.

They crowded noisily into a booth, clambering over each other's legs and somehow Jane ended up squashed in between Mike and Adam. She couldn't disguise the blush which crept slowly up her cheeks along with the realisation that her legs were dangling over one of Mike's, and that his hand was pressed into the seat next to hers.

As they ordered some food and milkshakes, she tried not to think about how closely they were pressed together, or the fact that she could smell him – a sort of clean, woodsy scent – and that it was *delicious*. She tried not to think about that, or the fact that she could sense his eyes on her, and feel the pull of the peculiar thread as everyone ate their fries and burgers and talked loudly over each other.

And she tried not to think about him, tried not to look.

It didn't work

It happened in a series of small, stolen looks - quick and involuntary – and she could tell that he knew every time she did, just as she had.

They wove a strange ballet of missed glances and fleeting moments, and before either of them realised it, the rest of the group had begun to leave the booth to make their way over to the movie theatre.

Jane pulled away from him, and slid out of the booth, trying unsuccessfully to hide how flustered she felt, and afraid to look back at him. She stood up and walked over to Max, finding that she needed to put some space between herself and Mike, needed to think.

Max didn't say anything, but then... she didn't have to; brows raised, her eyes took in Jane's flushed cheeks and then flicked to where Mike was standing next to Adam, and when they returned to meet Jane's gaze, there was a knowing glint there.

Jane didn't know how to explain herself.

Max merely rolled her eyes and grabbed Jane by the elbow, pulling her out the door of the diner and into the chilly night air.

"C'mon, we better go, or we'll miss the movie," she muttered, then added with a laugh, "You still got your wallet?"

"Yeah," Jane replied with a chuckle, "it's still here."

Mike managed, with a bit of careful manoeuvring - and no small amount of jeering from the guys, to end up next to Jane when they took their seats. He'd like to say he didn't know what he was doing, but he did. He'd done the same thing back at the diner.

He couldn't seem to help it.

He could see Max eyeballing him from the other side of Jane, but then Lucas snagged the seat next to her and she turned to talk to him. Or possibly argue. She did love to argue with Lucas.

Poor fool.

Shaking his head, he turned his gaze to the girl sitting next to him. Her long curly hair fell over her shoulders like a curtain, and she was rummaging around in her bag, and muttering to herself.

After a moment or two, she emerged from her bag with something clutched tightly in her palm, then looked up and caught his eye. With an embarrassed smile, she opened her hand to reveal a small red wallet. One that looked *familiar* somehow.

As if he'd seen it somewhere before. And maybe he had.

It was just a wallet.

"I'm sorry. I keep losing it."

Jane's soft voice broke into his thoughts like a pebble on water.

"I was just making sure it was still there..." she trailed off, dropped

her gaze to her hands, which were twisting together into awkward knots in her lap.

Mike laughed lightly, "It's fine."

He paused.

"So, um, how are you settling into Hawkins?" he asked, and instantly hated himself for the banality of the question.

"It's fine," she shrugged. "A bit bigger than the last place I lived."

"Why did your family move here?"

She looked at him carefully for a moment, her eyes dark and serious, before looking away again, and he was left with the curious feeling that she'd dismissed him.

Then she sighed.

"We needed a change of scenery."

"We?" he asked.

"Me and my aunt."

He decided not to ask what had happened to her parents.

The lights in the theatre began to dim and then fell to black completely, and Mike could hear Dustin offering some popcorn to April as everyone began to quiet down. He watched from the corner of his eye as Jane settled back into the seat, chewing absently on a Twizzler she'd stolen from Max and staring expectantly at the screen.

It flared to life a moment later and the first trailers began to run. Mike sat back in his seat and began to watch.

It was easy to relax, to become lulled by the flickering lights and warm air of the cinema. It was easy to let his hand drift – mere curiosity, he told himself, knowing it was a lie – to the armrest, mere centimetres from where Jane's arm sat.

At first he thought she hadn't noticed, but then-

A glance, stolen and swift, but he saw it.

And then an almost imperceptible movement, a slight shift, and their arms were resting against each other.

He could feel the warmth of her skin, could hear the quiet, shaky exhalation of her breath in the air. It was as though they were in place that was all their own.

Then, in a slow moment of realisation, he felt the soft brush of her fingers as they teased and then tangled into his, and he turned to look at her, to meet her dark, intense eyes.

And then, in a rush-

Mike? Mike? Where are you? Mike?

His eyes widened as he heard the voice and he felt his stomach lurch strangely – was it her? Was that Jane's voice?

He watched as Jane's eyes flickered with shock, and a heavy frown settled on her brow, and he knew she could hear it too, whatever it was.

El? El? Eleven!

He froze as he heard his own voice, sounding much younger, echoing in his ears. Who was Eleven? What the hell was going on?

I'm here Mike, I'm here!

Eleven! El, come back! We promised... we promised...

I'm here, Mike. Promise.

Promise.

And then suddenly, it stopped as Jane wrenched her hand from his, pulling it into her lap as though she'd injured it. Did she know what was happening? Was it her?

He looked around swiftly, and was surprised when he saw that no one had noticed, that they were all still engrossed by the movie. Except for Lucas and Max, who were busy sucking face on the other side of Jane.

Still shaken and heart pounding, he turned his attention back to the girl sitting next to him. She was looking down at her hand, fiddling with something on her wrist and completely ignoring the movie. Then he saw it, an eerie iridescent gleam...

A slender band, encircling her wrist, spun with silky crimson threads.

And wondered what the hell was going on, and who exactly was Jane Ives?

A/N: Soooo... I'm curious, what do you think? I know this is all a bit confusing at the moment but please stick with me. I promise it becomes clearer and it will all make sense. If you are curious about the origins of the myth I based this fic on, please let me know in the reviews and I will post a short explainer.

Thank you to all you lovely people who stopped by to read. I hope you've enjoyed this chapter.

Before I go I must say a huge thank you to sallyjavery who did an amazing job betaing this chapter. She made it sparkle.

Let me know what you think :)

-Millie xx

4. Of Tangents and Twine

A/N: New chapter. Stuff happens. The mystery deepens.

Enjoy :)

-M

OF TANGENTS AND TWINE

The air around her felt alive.

Dark and tense; shrill with awareness and things unspoken.

She was very conscious of Mike next to her - that he was watching her closely with shadowy eyes - and her fingers worried themselves irresistibly into the twine of her crimson band, anxious and nimble.

All sound seemed to have been leached from the theatre, the noise of the movie faded to nothing, and all she could really hear was the echoing of familiar voices in her head.

She felt numb.

Promise.

Why did that word have such resonance?

Slipping into her dreams, her visions, rippling at the edge of her consciousness... it was always there. A quavering note hidden within the beating of her heart. Then she raised her eyes to the screen, searching for something to anchor her.

But she found she couldn't quite see it... It was faded; slipping in and out of focus...

And there - like a taunt before her eyes - was that string, drifting capriciously and curiously vivid. She knew where it would lead.

But she didn't understand. She didn't understand any of it.

~XXXX~

She didn't look at him again after that strange moment, at least not until the credits started to roll on the movie. Funny, he couldn't remember what they'd sat down to watch. Or what it had even been about.

And then she'd shot him a look as the lights were flickering back to life; a wary, wild glance-

...like coffee and amber...

And he felt a jolt of... something... a half-remembrance or a dream. Another fragment.

And another question.

He sighed as he stood up, shaking rogue pieces of popcorn from his lap, before following Jane, and a rather dishevelled Max and Lucas. They shuffled towards the exit in silence, though the sounds of Dustin and Adam bickering good-naturedly carried clearly in the stale air, followed by the quieter murmurings of Deb and April.

Night had fully fallen and it was much colder now, the chill settling onto their hair and cheeks as they spilled out of the theatre and onto the sidewalk. Lucas, looking grimly determined, immediately grabbed hold of Max's hand and dragged her around the corner, and they all heard her growl, "Watch it, Sinclair," as they disappeared from view.

No one said anything for a moment.

"Well," came Adam's dry remark, "didn't see *that* coming."

"You didn't have to sit next to them," Jane replied, shaking her head with a grimace.

"Oh, don't worry about it," Deb said, "we all got a pretty good view from where we were."

"And, you know," Mike added, as they began to drift towards the parking lot, "I don't think we paid for front row seats."

"Dude, *no*," Dustin groaned.

"Dude, yes," Mike echoed.

"I had no idea she liked him," April chimed in. "All she ever does is complain about you guys."

"Well," Dustin laughed, "that's Max."

"What does that even *mean*?" Deb asked, blinking owlishly.

"Love, hate – fine line and all that," Dustin replied airily.

Deb looked to Mike and Adam for clarification, and Mike took perverse pleasure in committing to nothing more than an affable shrug, while Adam merely grinned. The blonde girl simply rolled her eyes, and fell into step next to Jane and April, who were talking quietly.

"Speaking of..." Adam began in a low voice, as Dustin joined them. "What's going on with you and Jane?"

"Hey, man, shut up," Mike replied, going on the defensive – because, really, he had no idea *what* was going on with him and Jane. "Did you catch me sucking face with her in there? Try Lucas."

"Very touchy, Mike," Dustin smirked. "Any reason why?"

"You want me to ask you why you were trading candy with April?" Mike shot back, and was surprised when he saw that Dustin (for once) had no ready response to his pointedly harmless jibe.

They caught up with girls, who'd paused in front of Deb's car and seemed to be debating something.

"...well I mean, I was going to take April home," Deb was saying, "so if you want, you can come with us?"

"What? You guys are leaving?" Mike asked hastily, his gaze darting to Jane, where she perched against the hood of the car.

"Do you know if Max and Lucas plan on coming back any time soon?"

Deb shot back, turning a frank gaze on the guys.

"Yeah," Jane nodded, not quite meeting his eye. "It's just that she gave me a ride over earlier. I wasn't sure whether I should hang around for her or not."

"And I've really got to get home," Deb added.

"I'm going with Deb – she's my ride," April explained.

"Yeah," Deb agreed. "We both live out past the quarry, and April doesn't have her licence yet."

"Me too," Dustin said, inclining his head towards April. "I'm still getting lessons."

"I just started." April smiled, and blushed a little as she glanced down at her feet. "I'm not very good."

"You'll be great," Dustin grinned back at her. "Right guys?"

"Sure," Adam chipped in, looming like a giant next to April's tiny form, while Mike nodded his agreement.

"Seriously," Jane laughed. "I've never even driven a car, so you're way ahead of me."

Mike wasn't alone in turning to look at Jane in surprise. She stilled self-consciously as their collective gaze fell on her, regarding them all with dark eyes and a heavy frown.

"What?" she asked. "It's not that weird, is it?"

"Um... no, of course not." Mike was quick to assure her. "Just most people in Hawkins need to drive, what with everything being sort of spread out."

"Oh..." she replied, seeming to breathe a sigh of relief. "Okay. Well, um, do you guys really not think Max is coming back any time soon?"

Dustin laughed and shook his head.

"I seriously doubt it."

"Are you sure?" Jane asked, a worried little frown appearing like a wrinkle between her eyebrows. "Coz I don't really have another way to get home."

"Yeah," Dustin shrugged, seemingly oblivious to Jane's concern, and Mike wanted to hit him for being such a tool. "I mean, Lucas and Max have been snarking and making gooey eyes at each other for, like, a year now. They need to sort that shit out."

No one said anything, and Dustin's face reddened slightly in discomfort as everyone turned to look at him.

"What?" he asked defensively. "That's what Lucas said, anyways. Well not the part about the gooey eyes, that's all my work, but he pretty much said the same thing to me."

"It's about goddamn time," Adam said, with something that sounded like a sigh of relief.

"I know," Mike grinned. "Right?"

Dustin nodded, rolling his eyes a little.

"Oh yeah," Mike went on, turning back to Jane. "So, um, it looks like Max and Lucas might be gone a while..." he paused for a moment, wanting to take his chance.

Just do it, he told himself. Ask her. 'Hey, Jane, I'll give you a ride home if you want.' Easy.

But before he could even form the words, Adam spoke up.

"Alright, so Deb and April are going in Deb's car, I'll take Dustin home, and Mike – you okay taking Jane?"

Usually, Mike liked to be the one in charge – an old habit from childhood - but for once he was happy to let Adam take the lead, and he shot him a grateful look, which Adam met with a single nod of acknowledgement. He glanced at Jane, feeling apprehensive

What if she says no?

"Is- is that okay with you?" he asked, the words tumbling from his mouth in an unruly rush.

And looking rather shy, she met his eyes for a brief moment before nodding slowly.

~xxxxx~

She walked with him to the car in slow silence. It was her preferred form of social currency. And she wasn't entirely used to talking to people her own age. Or even outside her own family.

Still, that was changing.

Becky wasn't her mom, not even close. They were nothing alike.

But Becky didn't know everything.

Jane sighed. She hated lying to her aunt. She hated lying to everyone.

"Hey..." Mike began, breaking the silence. "You okay?"

"Yeah..." she replied, but contradicted herself with another heavy sigh.

"Sure," he laughed lightly, as they stopped in front of his car. "You know..." he paused, eyes sliding down to his feet. "You know, you can talk to me if you want. I'm not an asshole – I wouldn't, like, go telling everyone your shit."

His eyes sought out hers as he finished, and though it was hard to see his expression in the gloom of the poorly-lit parking lot, she could hear the sincerity in his voice. She smiled wryly in response before adding:

"Maybe."

They got into the car and Mike fired up the engine, and began to pull out of the parking lot. He pulled down the window to throw a wave to Adam and Dustin on the way, who whooped and yelled back at

them as they drove off.

Silence fell once again, neither awkward nor comfortable; it simply *was*. It was Jane and Mike sitting in a car, alone with their thoughts. And that was kind of nice.

But there was an underlying tension stretching beneath the silence, one Jane wasn't sure she wanted to acknowledge, because it tugged and teased in a way that reminded her of the thread and its mocking undulations.

"Hey, um, Jane?" Mike's voice was quiet, falling gently between them.

"Yeah?"

"Do you have a curfew or anything?"

"Not really?" she replied. "I mean, my aunt didn't give me an *exact* time to be home at. She just told me not to be out too late." She shrugged, thinking about it. "I'm not really sure what that even means?"

"It means she's a lot cooler than my mom," Mike said with a gentle huff of laughter. "She's big into curfews. My sister Nancy used to break them all the time when she was in high school so it's kind of a *thing* my mom has now." He rolled his eyes. "Anyway, so you think your aunt won't mind if you're kinda late home?"

"I'd say she'll be okay," she nodded, hoping it was true. "She trusts me, I guess, and this is a small town," she went on, wondering where he was going with this. "Why?"

"Well..." he began, and his expression was something that was nervousness and awkwardness at the same time, though it was hard for Jane to tell in the soft gloom of the car. "I was sort of hoping... I mean - um... can we talk?"

"Are we not talking now?" she asked, confused.

Was there more than one kind of talking?

"No, we are," he hastened to reassure her. "It's just..." He pulled up at

a stoplight and turned his head to meet her eye. His were black and glinting in the half light, dark hooks for the soul, and she couldn't look away. She couldn't.

"But we need to *talk*, don't we?" he finally said, after what felt like hours.

And she nodded. Because the conversation he wanted, the one they *needed* to have, was inevitable anyway.

They were silent once more as the light turned green, and this time there was anticipation, almost palpable, between them. Jane could feel it ticking in her veins, making her fidgety and nervous. She wanted to look at him, but didn't; forcing herself to stare out of the window at the trees, so many trees, rushing past.

Until, a few minutes later, the car began to slow and Mike pulled in off the road. It was too dark to make out anything, save for the fact that they were surrounded by yet more trees.

He cut the engine but didn't turn to look at her immediately.

"You can see it too, can't you?" he said into the beating silence, and she didn't need to ask what he meant.

"Yes," she answered, her voice husky.

"What *is* it?" he asked, turning to face her then, eyes bright with curiosity.

"I... I don't know," she told him. "It's a thread."

"I know it's a thread," he said, a beat of impatience in his tone, "but what does it mean?"

"I'm sorry Mike... I don't know."

She did know, sort of, but it was hard to explain. What if he didn't believe her? What if he thought she was crazy?

"Can you tell me what you do know?"

"I know about your band – the one on your wrist," she murmured. "I have one too."

"I know."

"You do?" she asked, feeling a quick shiver of panic.

Had he seen her that night, when the thread had led her to him in the void?

"Yeah," he nodded. "I saw you playing with it earlier. During the movie," he added in response to her enquiring glance. "How long have you had it? Mine just... I dunno... *appeared* on my wrist the other day. I can't get it off," he finished, sounding bewildered.

"I've had mine for as long as I can remember," she replied truthfully. "It's always been there, and it's never come off."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's kind of strange..." she sighed, trying to find the words. Then she turned her body towards his, to look at him properly and went on, "I mean, you can see the thread right?"

"Well, not always"-

"But you can see it, right?" she cut in, trying to make her point while she still could. "Not everyone can, you know. In fact... you're the only other person I've met who can. I'm not sure what that means."

"And you're right; it's not always there. Sometimes it disappears for months," she told him, then paused. "Or it used to... before I moved here. But I think"- and here she had to stop and take a deep breath –"I think it has something to do with you."

"You might be right about that," he admitted wryly. "My life was boring until I met you."

She saw his eyes widen in alarm at his own candour, and she let out a chuckle.

"It's okay," she said, meeting his gaze shyly. "I know what you

meant."

He looked away, embarrassed.

"So..." he mused, "if the band on your wrist has always been there, does that mean you've always been able to see the thread?"

"It's been there for a long time," she answered carefully. She didn't know how to explain what happened in her head; in the deep, rippling void of her consciousness. She wasn't ready. "But only in my dreams, until lately. You saw it tonight?"

He nodded, then added, "But it wasn't the first time. I saw it the other day as well."

"In the hallway at school?" she asked, casting a furtive look his way. "The other day, right?"

"You saw it too?" he asked, relieved evident in his tone.

"Yes."

"Was that the first time you saw it? Like, outside of your dreams?"

She shook her head.

"Sometimes... I'd think I saw it. It'd be there, in the corner of my eye, and then I'd turn... and there'd be nothing." She shrugged, ignoring the chords of frustration laced into her tone. "But then at the arcade... I saw it." She paused and met his eye. "It didn't disappear."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

The silence yawned between them, vast and littered with confusion, and the only thing anchoring them was the red tendril which connected them.

"This is so weird," Mike sighed.

"I know."

"Did you... did you..." he attempted to phrase a question, then paused for a moment before deciding to abandon it. "You know what, never mind."

"No, tell me," she pleaded.

He sighed, clearly frustrated, "Not tonight. Another time, okay?"

"Okay," she replied, feeling strangely rebuffed.

"I just need to... I dunno..." he paused, running his hands through his hair, and then went on with a huff of laughter. "It's just so *weird*."

"I know," she repeated, then laughed.

And it was good laughter, the kind of laughter she was unused to, because laughter at all had been rare before; the kind of laughter which sounded so much better when Mike started to laugh too.

~XXXXX~

It was later than she realised when he dropped her off. The night was black, and had wrapped around them like a blanket on the drive back to her house. The glow from the porch light felt like a rude interruption as the car came to a stop outside her house.

Mike turned to look at her.

"So..." he began.

"So?" she echoed.

"I'll see you Monday?" he asked.

She smiled, "Yeah."

The silence between them grew weighty with meaning and Jane knew that if she were to look down at their twinned woven bands, they would be glowing as fiercely as the thread had that day in the hallway. Still, she tried not to look.

"Thanks for the ride home, by the way," she added, suddenly bashful.

"It was nothing," he demurred, with an easy shrug.

"Still..." she went on, "I wanted to say thank you. For tonight. I had fun."

He looked at her then, meeting her gaze squarely.

"Me too."

"We... we should do it again... sometime..." she said, feeling rather detached, dreamy.

"Yeah, we should," he agreed.

"I... I should probably say good night," she supplied, though she really didn't want to. "Becky will be wondering where I am."

He looked disappointed, she thought, though not surprised.

And even though she'd spoken the words, she felt unable to move, riveted by the certainty that their moment was not yet over. Gathering her courage and guided by instinct, she leant towards him and placed a gentle, breathy kiss onto his cheek.

She could feel the scrape of barely-there stubble beneath her lips, heard the ragged sound of his exhalation against her ear-

And she pulled back, heart pounding and eyes wide.

"Good night," she mumbled, suddenly unable to look at him. Then she grabbed her bag and scrambled out of the car before he could even respond.

~XXXXX~

Mike watched as Jane chased up the drive to her house like a startled rabbit, then turned away as she shut the door, having not once looked back.

He turned on the engine, though didn't immediately drive away, instead raising a fingertip to the spot she'd kissed, a thoughtful frown furrowing his brow.

In a habit he hadn't even realised he'd formed, he glanced down at the band on his wrist and saw it was gleaming. In some strange way, it felt as though it had always been there, as though it had been stitched into his skin – and he'd only just learned to see it.

Sighing, he glanced once more towards Jane's house, but his eye snagged on a familiar red wallet.

She had said she was always losing it.

He didn't mind. He liked having a valid excuse to see her again, sooner rather than later.

~XXXXX~

The door fell shut behind her with a gentle click. The house was dark, and Jane wondered if she was later than she'd first thought. Then a door opened and Becky stood silhouetted in the golden light which spilled from the room.

Jane felt a drop of liquid fear spill through her chest, an icy reminder of the last time she'd stood like this, as though caught in a trap.

"Well, hey there, stranger," Becky spoke, in a low sardonic tone. The faint tang of smoke followed her words from the kitchen.

She didn't reply, choosing instead to watch her aunt closely with shadowed wary eyes.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna bite you," continued Becky, a grin playing around her mouth. "I was getting a little worried is all." She paused. "Glad you're back safe and sound. You want cocoa?"

Jane allowed herself to relax, and she smiled and nodded.

She followed Becky into the kitchen. An empty cup sat side by side with a half-filled ashtray, and cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air. Jane watched as Becky moved around the kitchen, taking out a pot and setting it onto the stove.

"Grab the milk, would you Janie?" Becky asked with a quick glance over her shoulder.

She slouched over to the fridge, pulling out the carton, and passed it to Becky. Leaning back against the counter, Jane waited as her aunt poured the milk into the pot to boil and then turned to meet her square in the eye.

"So," she began, pulling a pack of cigarettes from her pocket, and lighting one. "You have fun?"

"Yeah," Jane nodded. "It was nice."

"Nice, huh?" Becky exhaled. "Better than fine then, yeah?"

Jane grinned ruefully, "Yeah, it is."

"You know, I wasn't expecting you back so late," Becky commented with another drag on her cigarette. "Who was the guy?"

Jane froze.

"You know, the one who dropped you home."

And try as she might, Jane couldn't help but remember another night, not so long ago – though it felt like forever – when she'd snuck out, desperate for one night, just *one night*, where she could feel normal; where she'd tasted what it was to have fun and be free...

And she'd been caught, and punished for it, by her mother.

She shivered.

"Jane."

Her name came on a sigh from her aunt, and it was enough to bring her back to the present.

"Jane, honey... I'm not your mom. You know that right?"

She nodded shakily, unsure of her voice.

"I know... I know what she did, Jane," Becky told her, voice tentative and grainy. "I know she locked you away and... I know why. And I'm sorry – *God*, I'm so sorry." She paused to take another emphatic drag

the cigarette. "But sweetie, I won't do that to you. I'll *never* do that. You'll never be locked away again."

She stubbed out the butt of her smoke and crossed to Jane, taking her shoulders into the warm grasp of her hands. Jane tried to meet her aunt's frank gaze, but it was difficult and she could feel burning at the back of her eyes, and she forced herself to look down, to master herself.

"Jane?"

"Do you promise?" she finally asked, her voice almost inaudible, even to her own ears.

"Yeah," came Becky's ready reply. "Yeah, I promise."

And then Becky's arms wrapped around her, pulling her close into a tight hug. It took her a moment to respond but she did, drawing her arms around her aunt, smelling the mingling scents of smoke and perfume and hairspray. When they pulled apart, Becky shot her an uncharacteristically soft smile and brought gentle hands up to her face, wiping away a few errant tears which had escaped.

"But, like, you know, I might ground you if you start acting like a little shit," she said with a little chuckle. "Okay?"

"Okay," Jane agreed, unable to help her answering smile. "I think I can handle that."

"Okay," Becky nodded, looking much happier. "So..." she went on, a sly grin creeping onto her face. "Who was the guy?"

And Jane, strangely enough, had the strangest urge to tell her. To tell her all about Mike – about *both* Mikes, about the thread and her strange connection to it all. But just as she was about to do it, or at least try, Becky's nose wrinkled and a look of disgust crept onto her face.

Jane stopped, sniffing the air, hit suddenly by the acrid smell of something burning. And then in the same moment, they both realised-

"The milk!"

Becky shot across to the stove, to the now smoking pot, and pulled it off the heat. She was regarding the contents with an expression of something akin to horror. Then she looked up at Jane, who was trying desperately not to laugh.

"Crap."

A/N: A huge thank you to sallyjavery who beta'd this chapter, actually all the chapters and offered me some solid advice on matters of Taste, and reminded me of safety first when driving, and has generally been an absolute star overall.

Thank you to all you lovely readers who stopped by to read, and stayed to follow, fave and review. I'm so happy people are enjoying this fic, even if it makes zero sense right now. I'm all about the slow reveal. Or something.

I'm sorry for how long this update took, but my real life is stupid busy and sometimes I'm lucky if I get even a couple of hours a week to write anything properly.

Finally, you can find me on tumblr under mildred-meadowlark, so say hi if you like :)

-Millie x